



SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 25

This is one of those acrostic psalms (like Psalm 119), in which the poet uses the order of the acrostic to shape his disordered thoughts. You have a sense of his disorder as he moves between testimonies and petitions, back and forth, and seeks guidance, comfort, forgiveness, strength, and rescue. And yet, central to his prayer-song is his confidence that God is the God of his salvation, that God is the source of every blessing, that God is upright and good.

I wonder if perhaps ordering our disorder through praying the psalms might not be a good discipline for us. As we pray these prayers back to God, we find our unruly hearts ruled by God's goodness and grace and we are reminded that our God through Jesus Christ is the one who will redeem us and has redeemed us from all our troubles.

HYMN: "COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING" *Trinity Hymnal* 457

Come, thou fount of ev'ry blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above;
praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's unchanging love.

Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wand'ring from the fold of God:
he to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.

O to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be;
let that grace now, like a fetter, bind my wand'ring heart to thee.
Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it—prone to leave the God I love:
here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

PRAYER:

Loving God, you teach us your truth in Holy Scripture, you lead us by your Holy Spirit, and you forgive us through the holy blood of Jesus. Help us to trust you more each day as we find ourselves wandering from your path and leaving your love. Grant us grace to turn and return so that we might find that all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for his own people. We ask this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever, Amen.

CATECHISM: Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 62

Why can't our good works be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of our righteousness?

Because the righteousness which can pass God's judgment must be entirely perfect and must in every way measure up to the divine law. But even our best works in this life are imperfect and stained with sin.



SCRIPTURE READING: 2 Chronicles 7:11-18

Sometimes these verses are used in reference to the United States, but it is important to look at them more carefully. First, God says this to Solomon after the completion of the temple; God is saying that he has adopted his temple as his own house and has put his name there. Second, God tells Solomon that there will be time when God's people (Israel) know catastrophe—no rain, no food, no health. In those times, they might pray to God and he will answer their prayer.

Of course, we know that God actually does this. When? With Elijah in 1 Kings 18. God had shut the heavens for three and a half years, but when Elijah bowed himself before the Lord—modeling the bowing of the people as they declared, “The Lord is God!” in the battle on Mount Carmel—God heard his prayer and answered. And the Apostle James will tell us, in James 5, that Elijah is a person just like us giving us confidence that the prayer of a righteous person avails much.

So, what should we take from this passage? When God's people pray, God promises to listen. So let's pray: “Hear our prayer, O Lord!”

“HEAR OUR PRAYER, O LORD” *Trinity Hymnal* 728

Hear our prayer, O Lord,
hear our prayer, O Lord;
incline thine ear to us,
and grant us thy peace. Amen.

PRAYER: (from Frank Topping, ed., *Daily Prayer*)

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things, graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of your great mercy keep us in the same, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Servant Lord, grant us both the opportunity and the will to serve you day by day. May all that we do and how we bear each other's burdens be our offering of love and service to the glory of your name, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Isaiah 38:9-20

We pray a lot when we or someone whom we love gets sick. I wonder, though, how often we pray prayers of gratitude when we get better. That's what these verses represent, a song of gratitude from Hezekiah upon his recovery. The first part of the song gives us his sense of despair over his sickness and apparently impending death. Yet midway through the tone of his prayer changes and he tells us two things.

First, he confesses that his sickness was for his welfare: "It was for my welfare that I had great bitterness." That doesn't mean that sickness is good—no, sickness is a result of the fall; it is part of the web of decay that typifies this world as a result of Adam's sin. However, it does mean that God is able to work all things—including our sickness—for salvation, for welfare, for good.

Second, he declares that God's love is steadfast and sure, evidenced in the fact "you have cast all my sins behind your back." For those of us who have come to know God through Jesus Christ, these two notes (and especially the second) should be ours when we pray in the aftermath of sickness and in the glow of recovery. God is sovereign and God's love is steadfast—on these two pillars, everything else hangs.

HYMN: "PRAISE, MY SOUL, THE KING OF HEAVEN" *Trinity Hymnal 76*

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven, to his feet your tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who, like me, his praise should sing?
Praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, praise the everlasting King.

Praise him for his grace and favor to our fathers in distress;
praise him, still the same forever, slow to chide and swift to bless;
praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, glorious in his faithfulness.

Fatherlike, he tends and spares us; well our feeble frame he knows;
in his hands he gently bears us, rescues us from all our foes;
praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, widely as his mercy goes.

Frail as summer's flow'r we flourish, blows the wind and it is gone;
but while mortals rise and perish, God endures unchanging on.
Praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, praise the High Eternal One.

Angels, help us to adore him; you behold him face to face;
sun and moon, bow down before him, dwellers all in time and space,
praise him, praise him, praise him, praise him, praise with us the God of grace.

PRAYER:

Like a swallow or a crane I chirp; I moan like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward. O Lord, I am oppressed; be my pledge of safety. O Lord, by these things men live, and in all these is the life of my spirit. Oh restore me to health and make me live! Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day! The Lord has saved me, and we will play your music all the days of our lives at the house of the Lord, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Mark 12:28-34

As the Pharisees and Sadducees try to trip Jesus up, one of the scribes wanders into the conversation. The scribes were “teachers of the law,” the equivalent to our seminary professors. These were specialists in the Bible, who wrestled over exegesis and biblical theology, who offered commentary and constructed systematic theologies. And so, his question was not surprising—because the scribes often debated whether there was a central organizing principle in God’s law.

In Jesus’ answer, we hear what it is that God desires from us: nothing less than whole-hearted devotion. Four times the word “all” is present—*all* your heart, *all* your soul, *all* your mind, *all* your strength. This is a whole-soul, whole-being love and devotion. All that we are and all that we have given over to God himself. And from that whole-soul, whole-being love and devotion for God, we are then to love our neighbors. As we love our very own selves, so we are to love our neighbors; as we love God, so we are to love our neighbors.

As a summary of what God desires—this is audacious, awe-inspiring. When we hear it, it strikes a chord with us—yes! This is what I was made for!

HYMN: “O GOD BEYOND ALL PRAISING” *Trinity Hymnal 660*

O God beyond all praising, we worship you today
and sing the love amazing that songs cannot repay;
for we can only wonder at every gift you send,
at blessings without number and mercies without end:
we lift our hearts before you and wait upon your word,
we honor and adore you, our great and mighty Lord.

Then hear, O gracious Savior, accept the love we bring,
that we who know your favor may serve you as our King;
and whether our tomorrows be filled with good or ill,
we’ll triumph through our sorrows and rise to bless you still:
to marvel at your beauty and glory in your ways,
and make a joyful duty our sacrifice of praise.

PRAYER: (from *Piercing Heaven: Prayers of the Puritans*)

Spirit of the Most High, the Comforter and Sanctifier of your chosen, come now with all your glory, all your courtly attendants, your fruits and graces. Let me be the place you live. I give you what is yours already. Here, with the poor widow, I cast my two pennies—my soul and my body—in your treasury. I fully resign them to you, to be sanctified by you, to be your servants. Lord, you have my heart in this agreement, never to be reversed. By grace I will stand in this resolution, where I live and die. I have sworn that I will give your righteous judgments. I have freely made my everlasting choice, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Romans 15:1-13

There are two blessings embedded in this passage. First, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:5-6). So, the first blessing that Paul asks God to give to his people is *harmony*.

And the second blessing is *hope*: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (15:13). Harmony and hope go together—a people that know harmony so that their collective praise is raised to the Father is a people that abound in hope. Conversely, a people that know disharmony—always fighting, complaining, grouching—is a people that lose hope. When a church goes too far in that direction, people leave the congregation.

That’s why it is imperative for us to ask God always for harmony and hope. These are the blessings that he delights to give through the Holy Spirit so that we might make it home to God safely.

HYMN: “HOLY SPIRIT, LIVING BREATH OF GOD” Getty & Townend

Holy Spirit, living breath of God, breathe new life into my willing soul.
 Let the presence of the risen Lord come renew my heart and make me whole.
 Cause your Word to come alive in me; give me faith for what I cannot see.
 Give me passion for your purity; Holy Spirit, breathe new life in me.

Holy Spirit, come abide within, may your joy be seen in all I do.
 Love enough to cover every sin, in each thought and deed and attitude.
 Kindness to the greatest and the least, gentleness that sows the path of peace.
 Turn my strivings into works of grace; breath of God, show Christ in all I do.

Holy Spirit, from creation’s birth, giving life to all that God has made,
 show your power once again on earth, cause your church to hunger for your ways.
 Let the fragrance of our prayers arise; lead us on the road of sacrifice,
 that in unity the face of Christ may be clear for all the world to see.

PRAYER:

Lord, please continue to give your blessing of harmony to our congregation. Grant us grace to assume the best, not the worst, about one another. Grant us grace not to gripe or complain when things don’t happen in the ways or on the timetable that we think they ought. Rather, grant that we might live in such harmony with each other that others would long to be welcomed by us as we are welcomed by Christ. In this, increase our hope by your Spirit so that as we believe in Jesus and are filled with his joy and peace, we might minister the hope of the Gospel to all in our midst. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Corinthians 13

One of my favorite sayings from the eighteenth-century preacher and hymn writer John Newton goes this way: “Although my memory’s fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.” When all fades away—our great sermons, our personal sacrifice, our massive accomplishment, even all this age represents—what remains? What abides?

Paul tells us here: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (13:13). The great virtues abide: faith in Christ, hope in Christ, the love of Christ. That’s what remains. I wonder how often I chase after the fading glorious instead of these virtues? I wonder how often I spend my waking hours working for things that I won’t remember either later in this life or surely in the next? I wonder how different my life would be if my heart’s goal was to cultivate such permanent virtues? I wonder—do you?

HYMN: “THOUGH I MAY SPEAK WITH BRAVEST FIRE” *Trinity Hymnal* 597

Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gift to all inspire,
and have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess, and striving so my love profess,
but not be giv’n by love within, the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed; by this we worship and are freed.

PRAYER: (adapted from a prayer by Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church)

O, infinite amiableness! When shall I love you without bounds? Without coldness or interruption, which, alas! so often seize me here below? Let me never suffer any creature to be your rival, or simply to share my heart with you. Let me have no other God, no other love, but only you. O Crucified Jesus! In whom I love, and without whom I die! Mortify in me all sensual desires; inflame my heart with your holy love, so that I may no longer esteem the vanities of this world, but rest my affections entirely on you. Let my last breath, when my soul shall leave my body, breathe forth love to you, my God, for I pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Thessalonians 5

Have you ever had an argument with someone who was determined to get the final word? Of course you have. What was that like? The argument would be winding down—either in a stalemate (like most arguments) or perhaps with your point standing. And yet, the other person won't let it go: "Yes, but..." And another round in the never-ending argument ensues.

Take another look at the final words of this chapter, of this letter. On the surface, this seems to be the Apostle Paul's final word, but really it is God's final word—this is a benediction, a good final word to send us on our way: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (5:28).

Think about that: no matter what stalemate you find yourself in, no matter how many times you say "yes, but" to God, he keeps coming back to get the final word: God's grace through Jesus Christ with you. That's good news for sinners like us!

HYMN: "ALL THE WAY MY SAVIOR LEADS ME" *Trinity Hymnal* 605

All the way my Savior leads me; what have I to ask beside?
 Can I doubt his tender mercy, who through life has been my guide?
 Heav'nly peace, divinest comfort, here by faith in him to dwell;
 for I know, whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well;
 for I know, whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well.

All the way my Savior leads me, cheers each winding path I tread,
 gives me grace for ev'ry trial, feeds me with the living bread.
 Though my weary steps may falter, and my soul athirst may be,
 gushing from the rock before me, lo, a spring of joy I see;
 gushing from the rock before me, lo, a spring of joy I see!

All the way my Savior leads me—O the fulness of his love!
 Perfect rest to me is promised in my Father's house above:
 when my spirit, clothed, immortal, wings its flight to realms of day,
 this my song through endless ages: Jesus led me all the way;
 this my song through endless ages: Jesus led me all the way!

PRAYER:

Lord God, how often I keep arguing with you and you keep getting the final word of grace! Thank you for not giving up on me, giving me over to my own devices and desires, or walking away in frustration. Thank you for continuing to show me favor and mercy through Jesus Christ. Thank you for leading me all through this life, feeding me with your living bread, and strengthening my steps through life's weary path. Thank you for all that you are and all that you have given me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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